

Border Beagle Brigade

Every year, millions of people cross the border from Mexico into the United States. Many travelers carry fruit, vegetables, and meat products, not realizing that these agricultural products could be carrying pests and diseases that can devastate U.S. agriculture and cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars to eradicate. Officers of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are stationed at all border ports, working to safeguard agriculture.

When crossing the border, travelers are asked to declare all agricultural products in their possession. Some people will have their cars searched or their bags put through x-ray machines by Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) officers from USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to make sure they are not carrying prohibited agricultural products. Now there is a new tool to assist PPQ officers at the border in detecting these goods: the Border Beagle Brigade.

Beagles on the Border

The Border Beagle Brigade is an extension of USDA's Beagle Brigade. The Beagle Brigade was started in 1984 and works at 21 international airports and select U.S. mail facilities, detecting prohibited agricultural items such as fruits, plants, and meats. The beagles locate thousands of pounds of contraband every year. With the success of the Beagle Brigade, USDA decided to expand the program to include border ports.

The Border Beagle Brigade is very similar to the Beagle Brigade in that their job is to sniff out prohibited agricultural goods. However, they will be working on the U.S.–Mexican border, checking vehicles and baggage. The Border Beagle Brigade began in 1997 as a pilot project at the Hidalgo, TX, port of entry. The pilot program successfully showed that a canine team, working in conjunction with PPQ officers and x-ray machines, would save time. With these results, USDA decided to place canine at other border ports. The canines will augment the work of PPQ officers who inspect passenger baggage and vehicles at land border ports, assisting with the detection of prohibited agricultural items in luggage and vehicles.

A Day in The Life of a Detector Dog

A detector dog's job is to sniff the baggage and vehicles of international travelers as they proceed through Federal Inspection Service areas at border crossing stations. When one of these specially trained beagles detects any prohibited agricultural items, it sits to alert its partner, the PPQ officer. The officer then checks the indicated bag or vehicle, confiscates any prohibited items, and gives the dog a food reward. Officers can fine travelers up to \$250 on the spot if they did not declare the found agricultural items. The prohibited goods are confiscated without compensation and destroyed.

A typical border beagle workday may also include conducting a demonstration at a school, visiting the veterinarian, or commuting to and from work. Because of their sensitivity to the smell of food, all Beagle Brigade dogs live in kennels, not at home with their human partners. At meal time, Beagle Brigade dogs eat a high protein diet and during each work hour, receive rest for at least 20 minutes.

Typically, a Beagle Brigade dog's career spans about 6 years. Throughout their partnership, the PPQ officer develops a close relationship with his or her dog and is aware of even minor changes in the dog's behavior. When a dog is retired, his or her last partner has the option of keeping the dog as a pet. If the PPQ officer does not keep the dog, APHIS finds it another suitable home.

Off to School

How does a beagle become a member of the Beagle Brigade? Beagle Brigade candidates are donated by private owners and breeders or selected from animal shelters. When beagles arrive, trainers evaluate each dog for its temperament to ensure it is neither too shy nor too aggressive. Dogs that pass the evaluations are paired with PPQ officers who not only handle the dogs, but provide care and continued training. If a dog does not pass the evaluation or the training, APHIS will find a home for it.

APHIS selected beagles as the breed for agricultural inspection at ports because of their acute sense of smell and their gentle nature with people. The dogs' natural love of food makes them effective detectives and happy to work for treats. Because beagles are raised in packs, they remain calm in crowded, noisy locations.

Once PPQ canine officers and beagles complete basic training, beagles are awarded their distinctive green jackets. Canine officers and beagles are then deployed to their duty stations throughout the United States. Beagles and handlers go through most of the initial training together. A trainer teaches the dogs to respond passively by getting the dogs to sit when they smell the scents of citrus fruits, mango, beef, or pork. During their 8–12 weeks of training, dogs receive food rewards for desired responses. After 1 year of experience, beagles sniff out prohibited material correctly 80 percent of the time. Their success rate rises to about 90 percent after 2 years of experience.

Additional Information

For more information about the Beagle Brigade, in airports and at the border, please visit the APHIS web site at www.aphis.usda.gov or contact APHIS at:

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